

On professional versus amateur contribution to the media

In 2006 Time magazine decided that YOU was to be awarded “person of the year”; in the words of Richard Stengel “individuals are changing the nature of the information age[...] the creators and consumers of user-generated content are transforming art and politics and commerce [...] they are engaged citizens of a new digital democracy”¹.

In the same article he adds “The new media age of Web 2.0 is threatening only If you believe that an excess of democracy is the road to anarchy. I don't”.

In this text I am going argue that *an excess of democracy* is not what the digital revolution led us to, and why praising YOU perfectly fits market's interests.

Time magazine, in that renowned issue, proceeds explaining the profits of citizen journalism: “a mother in Baghdad with a videophone can let you see a roadside bombing, or a patron in a nightclub can show you a racist rant by a famous comedian”.

The new media technologies allow us in fact to register, publish and discuss current events in a way so fast and easy as never before.

The World Wide Web made it possible for millions of people to build a *cosmic compendium of knowledge*; people devoting their free time helping one another to make an everyday better Wikipedia and an everyday larger Youtube. With the easy and accessible tools that the Internet gives us today it is fairly easy to bring together the smallest contributions to improve an encyclopedia entry, work on the source code of a program – all things that in the past required our physical presence now are not bound to a place anymore.

We can know what happens in the world in real time from the direct source: the people themselves. We can judge a book by reviews written on amazon by readers, or hear about election candidates directly from his potential voters: those are people like us, they have energy and passion, we trust them even though they are strangers because they do not yield the awe typical of the Authority.

“Car companies are running open design contests. Reuters is carrying blog postings alongside its regular news feed”², says Lev Grossman in the same issue of Time; for the imperative is to build “a new kind of international understanding [...] citizen to citizen, person to person”.

The web 2.0 revolution is led by ordinary people: hobbyists, diarists and armchair pundit; amateurs in other words, says Steven Johnson from Time magazine.

What they want to achieve is an extreme form of democracy where everybody is allowed to broadcast their voice, and every voice is weighed the same.

Those who defend this radical egalitarianism would argue that putting every source next to each other, regardless of the authority it has, makes the talented stand out from the crowd. Johnson says “bloggers and Wikipedians are likely to do some things better than their professional equivalents and some things much worse, and we may as well figure out which is

1 Richard Stengel – Now It's Your Turn – Time, december 25th 2006, january 1st 2007

2 Lev Grossman – Time's Person of the Year: You – Time, december 25th 2006, january 1st 2007

which.”³

Andrew Keen in his book “the Cult of the Amateur” states “In a world in which audience and author are increasingly indistinguishable, and where authenticity is almost impossible to verify, the idea of original authorship and intellectual property has been seriously compromised”⁴. When it comes to taking the place of professionals, audience taking the place of the Author, Johnson argues that the problem is that we are overstating

“the importance of amateur journalism and encyclopedia authoring in the vast marketplace of ideas that the Web has opened up” [...] “The most obvious example of this is in the prominence of diary-style pages like those on LiveJournal or MySpace. These people aren't challenging David Brooks or George Will; they're just writing about their lives and the lives of their friends. The overwhelming majority of photographers at Flickr harbor no dream of becoming the next Annie Leibovitz. They just want to share with their extended family the pics they snapped over the holidays.”

Keen's reasoning, in this case, is that when everyone is broadcasting themselves – not contributing anymore with meaningful pieces of information, but with *pics they snapped over the holidays* – nobody is really listening, “out of this Anarchy, it suddenly becomes clear that what is governing the infinite monkeys inputting away on the Internet is the law of digital Darwinism : the survival of the loudest and the more opinionated. Under these rules the only way to intellectually prevail is by infinite filibustering”.

The system of values with which the concept of Authority has been established, is what our society engineered to filter the *noise* in the stream of informations.

If everybody has a say in every field, it suddenly takes an incredible amount of time to discern what is relevant information from what is not, bloggers may *be likely to do some things better than their professional equivalent*, but how can we tell the difference between the *better* and the *much worse*?

A year ago the mere survival of many newspapers seemed doubtful. It had become clear that the young, in particular, were getting much of their news online. Readers were flitting from story to story, rarely paying. Advertising too was moving online, but not to newspapers' websites. Rather, it was being swallowed by search engines. The classified-ad market was ravaged by free listings websites such as Craigslist.

[...] for the most part newspapers have cut their way out of crisis. In the past year McClatchy reduced payroll costs by 25%. Many publications closed bureaus and forced journalists to take unpaid leave.

[...]

The survival of newspapers is by no means guaranteed. They still face big structural obstacles: it remains unclear, for example, whether the young will pay for news in any form.⁽⁵⁾

3 Steven Johnson – Now It's Your Turn – Time, december 25th 2006, january 1st 2007

4 Keen, A. 2008. The Cult of the Amateur. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing p. 23

5 *The strange survival of ink* - The Economist, print edition June 10th 2010

Millions of bloggers are threatening the jobs of a handful of hundreds of paid journalists and experts in various fields.

Those employed professionals are receiving money in exchange of their knowledge and skill, knowledge that requires fostering and nurture, they are one of the many expressions of our highly specialized society: claiming that kind of proficiency is no longer required corresponds to disregard the pillars of higher education itself.

The Scholar, the Expert are what we nowadays consider reliable sources of information because of their studies; the news channels and the newspapers we consider reliable sources as well, because their integrity is at stake every time they make a statement: their editorial staff takes the responsibility that comes with distributing information, years have been devoted to building their credibility.

Wikileaks is a bright example of independent organization questioning the credibility of those mainstream authorities previously considered reliable; Julian Assange brilliantly showed how easy it has become, with the current technologies, to obtain confidential documents and leak them publicly.

“There's widespread disillusionment with the public and particularly younger people who see the mainstream media as too timid, conservative and protective of the establishment.

Wikileaks provides whistleblowers a way to anonymously provide documents to the entire planet and not worry about them getting censored and filtered” explains journalism professor Mark Feldstein at George Washington University.⁶

In this case, the relationship between mainstream media, and an organization such as Wikileaks, can re-shape the way the public access information; the critics they implicitly move are bound to force newspapers to drop their reluctant attitude in order to gain the trust of the public once again.

Another point of view for the situation comes from examining the imperative that Web 2.0 society announces: participate, share, upload.

Mark Andrejevic argues about the consequences of the digital revolution providing historical overview of the shifts in the relationship between labour, leisure and community life.

In the pre-Industrialized era, that we could call in a way “traditional”, the product of labour was non-alienated, handcrafted commodities; everybody had a fixed role in the community life.

Surveillance and supervision were a duty of the elderly in the family, and the neighbour.

After the Industrial revolution such premises change, there's a need to rationalize the “impersonal marketplace”, enormous quantities of various goods are produced, and advertising is there to ensure that their consumption is on a balanced scale.

In the Fordist society work is highly alienated and physically linked to a time and a fixed

6 Charles Q. Choi – How Will WikiLeaks Transform Mainstream Media? – Scientific American, december 1st 2010

space; a firm division between mental and material labour is established, which deeply characterizes the mass society. “a more generalized form of mutual surveillance is replaced by segmented and hierarchical structures of monitoring. Increasing scrutiny in the workplace is accompanied by increasing anonymity outside it”⁷.

It is a “top-down” model of monitoring: the physical presence of the watcher is required and therefore the physical presence of the watched. In the school, the workplace, the asylum, monitoring is being physically exercised.

How does this change again in the mass-media-driven, post-Fordist society?

That's where what Andrejevic calls a “digital revolution” comes into play:

“the revolutionary promise of the digital future [...] is to free us from the rigid spatial and temporal boundaries associated with the rationalization of modern society: the demarcation of the work day and of spaces of leisure, domesticity, consumption, production. The dedifferentiated future is one in which we will be able to work or shop online during our morning commute – or, if we're tired of commuting, to work from the privacy of home or the local Starbuck's”

The promise is one of flexibility and convenience for workers and consumers alike.

But that kind of flexibility is a double edged weapon: the collapsing distance between work and leisure on one hand – associated with interactive and online forms of consumption – and the slow merging of work and daily life on the other, transform the rhythm of daily life into a value-generating activity by virtue of the fact that they can be monitored.

The separation between spaces of work, domesticity and leisure doesn't allow a physical form of monitoring that was characteristic of the post-Fordist society.

The form of surveillance that once was part of the community life now is expressed in the need of “watch and being watched”; it is fairly easy to imagine how having a video-camera in every phone makes us feel safer, should we find ourselves in a situation that requires testimony, nevertheless the level of monitoring that we willingly allow in the name of *information in all place at all times* is alarming.

Bentham and Foucault's work on prison is useful in this context to illustrate the impact of surveillance on contemporary society.

“Foucault borrows from Bentham the term Panopticon (one who sees all) to denote the entire apparatus of defining the norm, disciplining the negative term, observing the change from the negative to the positive and studying the whole process so that it can be perfected”⁸.

The Panopticon is an artifice through which the prisoner is constantly monitored by guards without chance of escaping.

We also know that for Bentham the Panopticon is a failure for “it does not reform prisoners”, but it can have other applications.

For Foucault the prison in this world “imposes the technology of power”: in contemporary society power is imposed not anymore by physical surveillance, by brute force, but via the continual monitoring of daily life.

7 Andrejevic, M 2003. Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched – Ch. 2 “The Promise of the Digital Revolution”. Rowman & Littlefield pp. 25-28

8 Poster, M. 1990. The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context - Ch. 3 “Foucault and Databases: Participatory Surveillance”. Chicago: University of Chicago p.90-91

“Modern society may be read as a discourse in which nominal freedom of action is canceled by the ubiquitous look of the other. It may be interpreted semiologically as a field of signs in which the metadiscourse of the Panopticon is reimposed everywhere, even in places in which is not installed.”⁹

Prior to the digital revolution the Panopticon was inefficient because of technical limitations – as previously noted it was based on constant physical monitoring – while in contemporary society, thanks to the constant data-generating activities we perform, a form of *Superpanopticon* is constituted: “a system of surveillance without walls, windows, towers or guards”.

As Mark Poster cleverly notes “the populace has been disciplined to surveillance and participating in the process” and he mentions social security cards, driver's licenses and credit cards, but we might add Amazon reviews, Youtube videos, and compulsive information filling on Facebook profile and applications.

On one hand broadcasting ourselves, being the person of the year on Times magazine in 2006 makes us feel incredibly good, on the other hand Foucault's concept of *governmentality* comes to mind: it suddenly makes more sense why it does feel our civic duty to participate in the perpetual sharing of geolocalized information.

9 Poster, M. 1990. *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context* - Ch. 3 “Foucault and Databases: Participatory Surveillance”. Chicago: University of Chicago p. 91

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